

The Elephant Hunter

by Lorrie McLaughlin

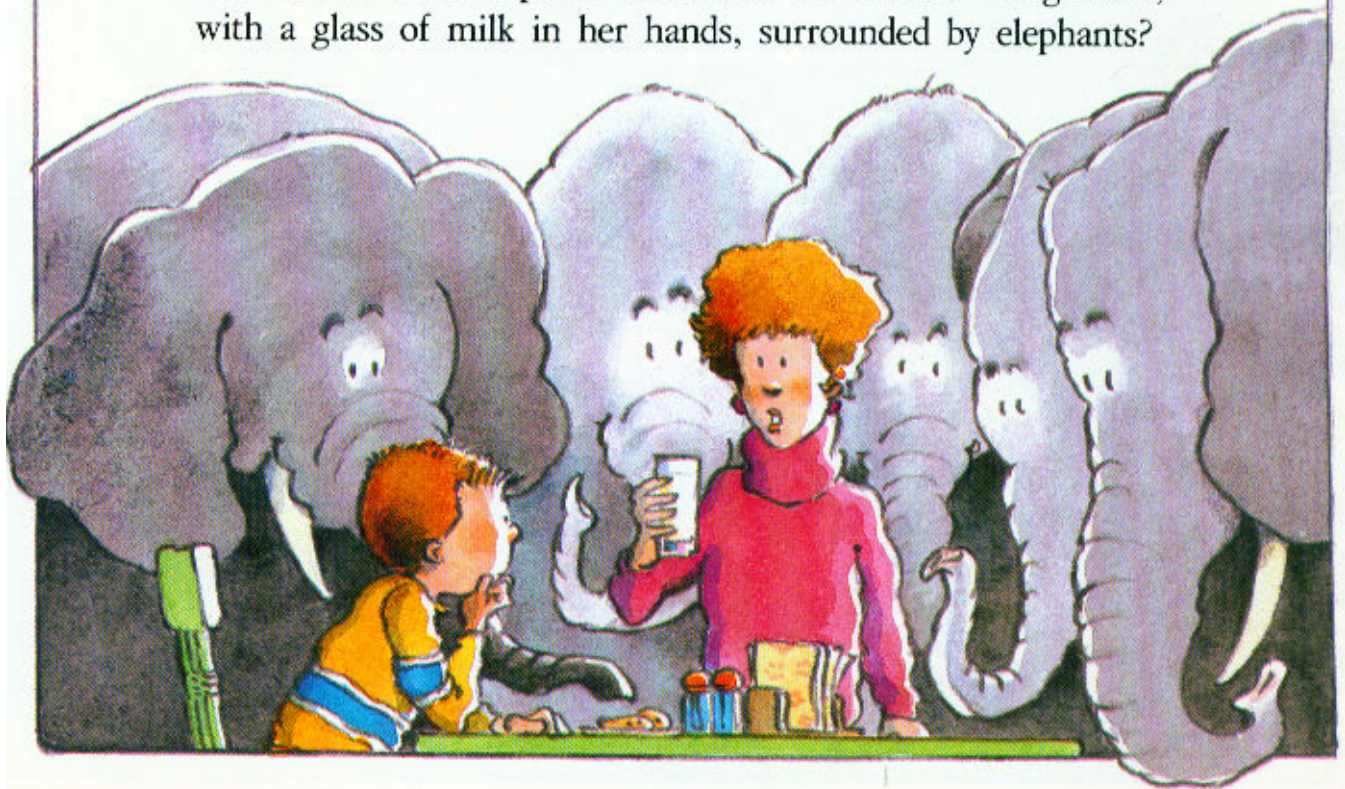
Illustrated by Mike Martchenko

James was an elephant hunter, although no one would guess it just by looking at him.

Sometimes, people thought that there was something different about James, but they could never quite decide what it was.

"James!" his mother would say. "Stop staring into space and drink your milk."

When his mother said that, James would blink once and look at her with surprise. What was his mother doing there, with a glass of milk in her hands, surrounded by elephants?



When he blinked again, the elephants would go back into the jungle and he would say, "Yes, Ma'am," and drink his milk the way he was supposed to do.

"Don't worry so much about James," said his father, once or twice a day. "He'll be fine. He's just thinking."

When his father said that, James would blink once and try to look like somebody who was thinking, instead of like somebody who was hunting elephants.

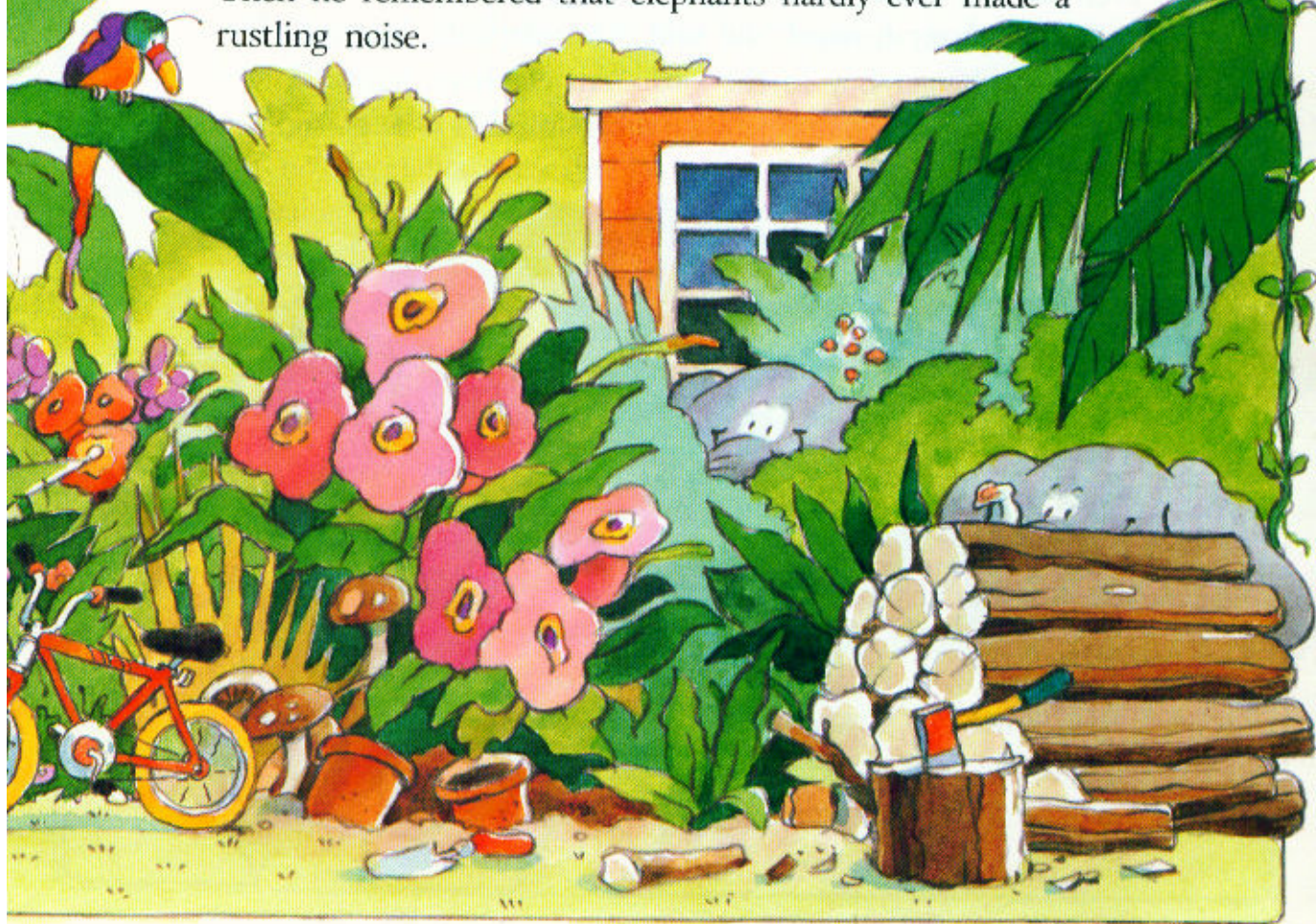
Days when his mother and father didn't worry about whether he was staring into space or thinking, James went out into the jungle behind his house and hunted elephants from early in the morning until dinnertime.



Some days he hunted one or two, and some days he hunted as many as fifteen, and some days he didn't hunt any at all because all the elephants were off doing whatever elephants do when they are not being chased by an elephant hunter.

One morning James was lying on his back, under a maple tree, thinking about being an elephant hunter and looking at the sky, when he heard a rustling in the bushes behind him.

For a minute, he thought it might be an elephant or two. Then he remembered that elephants hardly ever made a rustling noise.



He sat up and looked around at two boys, one even smaller than he was and one a little bit bigger.

"Who are you and what are you doing?" demanded the bigger boy.

"I'm James, the elephant hunter," said James. And then he shut his mouth so tightly he almost bit his tongue. He hadn't meant to tell *anybody* that he was an elephant hunter. He knew that the minute he told anybody, nothing was ever quite the same.

The bigger boy just stared at him, but the boy who was even smaller than James began to giggle.

"An elephant hunter!" he said. "An elephant hunter!" He poked the bigger boy in the ribs. "An elephant hunter!"

The bigger boy didn't say anything at all. He kept right



on staring. Then he took the smaller boy by the arm and pulled him out of the yard, back to the sidewalk.

James stayed where he was, watching them walk down the street, the smaller boy still giggling and the bigger boy still not saying anything at all.

James sighed, finally. He lay down on the grass, staring up through the leaves to the blue sky.

The elephants were probably all gone, he decided. He probably wouldn't ever be an elephant hunter again.

He rolled over on his stomach and stared around his jungle. Over there by the garage he had hunted his very first elephant. And down by the lilac bush he had hunted at least three.

He looked at the garage and the lilac bush and waited. But no elephants came by. Not any at all. Not even when he waited for fifteen minutes.

James began untying and tying his shoelaces, wondering what he would do on Saturdays and holidays and warm summer evenings, now that there were no elephants left to hunt.

He tied two knots in one shoelace and wished that there was some way to call back words. If he hadn't told the boys he was an elephant hunter, things would be the same as they had always been.

He heard a rustling in the bushes behind him and tied a third knot in his shoelace. There was no use in turning around. No use at all. Elephants didn't rustle in bushes and even if they *did*, they would never come into his private jungle again.

James waited until the rustling had stopped. He turned around slowly and looked at the bigger boy.

"Where's your friend?" he said.

"He's my brother and he's home," said the bigger boy. He reached into a pocket and pulled out two crushed, dusty-looking doughnuts. He held one out to James.

James looked at it and then at the boy.

"Go on," said the bigger boy. "Take it." He shoved the doughnut across the grass toward James. He sat down on the grass beside him, eyes narrowed to slits. "We may have to wait a long time, you know," he said in a whisper. "Once elephants have been scared away by giggling, it takes a while for them to come back."

James took a small bite out of the doughnut. "Maybe all day," he said. "At least until sundown."

The bigger boy nodded his head. "Easily until sundown."

The two of them crouched in the grass, in the heart of the jungle, and waited, quietly, for the elephants to come.

